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ARE THE ENGLISH GOOD LOSERS?

BY LINCOLN WILBAR

LIKE the wise general who aims to get his blow in first, I, an Englishman, hasten to answer my own question in the negative, hoping thus to gain the advantage of surprise and the moral effect of presenting an idea prejudged to the jury. The English, as a people, are not, in my opinion, good losers. The inception of an idea does not demand, as an inherent necessity, any basic connection with truth, nor does its subsequent growth into universal acceptance prove that it had such connection; and, contrary to the popular belief in the sportsman-like bearing of the English in the face of defeat, the real fact seems to be that the psychological, moral and mental effects wrought in them by losing are not less marked than these effects commonly are in the spirit of other temperate races. Among themselves the English accept defeat with a sufficient grace, though even here the veneer of pose lies thinly over the natural grain, as is evidenced by the inevitable excuse of failure—excuse typified by the familiar “lame wrist” of the vanquished tennis player,—but in their contests or competitions with another people, in the success of which popular feeling is keenly concerned and national pride enlisted, they do not accept the loser’s rôle with abounding inward good will, however they may dress the part. And, aside from the immediate social amenities, it is the real inward rather than the apparent outward attitude toward defeat which matters. The English in their bearing before the world may not permit themselves the indulgence of direct outward expressions of the natural emotions of the defeated, such as one expects of more emotional races, but the underlying spirit of hostility to a victory of their losing is, if anything, the greater for this artificial repression, and its potential menace, therefore, a more dangerous social factor.

When other races effervesce freely in defeat, their froth soon exhausts not only itself but its origin. No lees of ill-feeling remain to add their bitterness to succeeding cups of gall and wormwood. In the English temperament, on the other hand, the effects of defeat permeate rather than bubble and hiss and disperse at the surface, and the consequences of a series of defeats, especially defeats from the same general quarters, are apt to result in a distinct acerbation of existing racial jealousies and antagonisms, and a feeling almost of rancour against the victorious person or people. Outwardly there may be only those amenities which good breeding and the courtesies of sport require, but inwardly the rasp of defeat excoriates the highly sensitized vanity of a people only now just rawly awakened to the broken sequence of their habit of victory, and it is the inward, rather than the outward, manner in which defeat is accepted which constitutes the quality of the loser. On this showing the English are, *ipso facto*, decidedly not good losers.

The individual Englishman, being subject to the restraining moral influence of the world's public opinion, which presupposes him to be a "sportsman," manages to preserve at least the outward appearance of losing gracefully, and certainly harbors no rankling animus, either to the victor or to his tribe. He is in truth what the world has come to call him—a sportsman. But like parts do not always make a like whole, and the English, as a homogeneous people, largely made up of like parts, curiously enough secretly regard defeat by foreign competitors as a sort of incomprehensible and gratuitous affront to their sacred ordained right to win. In their inmost hearts they treasure an accumulative grudge, not so much in consequence of the act of losing as in consequence of the idea of defeat, not so much against the person of the individual competitors as against the national composite of the winners. They cannot with equanimity and a true sense of the right of things see another people, or the representatives of another people, win against themselves, even though in the reasoning faculty of their minds they must perforce recognize the fact, patent enough to others, that in some measure they have merited victory by no worthier desert than belief in their traditional divine right to it.

Without being actually blind to degrees of superiority

in others, the English certainly do not see those degrees (where such exist) very clearly. The human eye is curiously retentive of the image of any brilliantly illuminated object at which it looks long and intently; and, figuratively speaking, the English have looked so persistently and for so many years at the sun of their own successes arching practically unchallenged and undimmed in the firmament of mankind, that now, when their sun is beginning to suffer frequent eclipses as competing suns presume to an orbit in the heavens, they cannot turn their dazzled eyes away and see distinctly any other source of radiance in the sky than that which lingers as a nerve sensation in the impress of their special sun on their retina. Reason, stimulated into action by the observance of phenomena such as characterize the impossibility of a defeat which somehow has managed to come off, must, of course, long since have informed them of the presence of rival suns, as reason proved to Le Verrier the existence of the invisible planet Neptune; but it is only when one or another of those contending suns collides violently and victoriously with their own sun, causing its light to dim suddenly in the shock of the collision, as the lights of a ship pale at the impact with an iceberg—it is only then that the English are able to see, with anything like distinctness, the actual proportions and dimensions of their adversary's superiority.

For habit is strong in the English. And the habit of winning, acquired through the centuries, has become so firmly established in the English character that, in spite of numerous clarifying "eye-openers" received in recent years, the national expression, in the face of a defeat which touches the national pride, may be said, metaphorically if not always literally, to be marred occasionally by the unwitting scowl of defective vision. A people not notorious for imagination, must perforce strain their sight to see an accomplished impossibility that is out of their focus. In time, no doubt, the corrective influence of their rising ratio of defeats in practically every field of endeavor will rectify this characteristic optical defect; but up to the present, losing has not become a habit with them, only a variation of a habit. Hence my concern is not with what may show, now and again, on the surface, and which is deceptive and transitory, but with the deeper, more permanent and progressive effects which defeat pro-

duces on the psychology and temperament of the English.

It is the inward rather than the outward acceptance of defeat which marks distinctions between good losers and bad losers. The loser who flings himself about in a rage is a disagreeable, possibly a temporarily ill-disposed, rival; but his transport is transient, its very violence and openness being the warrant of its speedy death. There are no accumulative after effects. The so-called good loser, on the other hand—the loser who suppresses all show of chagrin and dissembles with a smile, is likely to be, potentially at any rate, a more or less inimical element, the degree of his hostility depending on the degree of his virility and the extent of the wound to his pride. In the case of the English (to whom “winning” and “good form” are traditional terms), the shock to their *amour propre* of a conspicuous defeat is far greater than the shock of a similar defeat would be to a people more accustomed to losing; and since they absorb the whole of this shock into their system, allowing none of it to escape at the usual safety valve in the form of a free flow of the natural language of discomfiture, the inevitable consequence is a more lasting impression, a more irritating action, on the national ego.

Underneath the veneer of a thousand years of civilization the English are still a very primitive race. Indeed, their primitiveness comes, in places, strangely close to the surface. And everywhere it is a separate and distinct element or stratum in the English character. At no point has it merged indistinguishably with the civilization which has been laid over it. When, therefore, the national emotion of vexation,—which is the earliest, as it is the mildest, of the sentiments inseparable from defeat,—strikes deep into the English consciousness, it buries itself in something that is very crude and very vital. There is no middle stratum in which it can waste harmlessly away, like a variant of the Cheshire cat, until nothing remains—self-consumed, as it were, in a neutral environment, but instead it finds permanent lodgment in the real, as distinct from the artificial, substance of the race, and, being denied wholesome, purifying air by the outer shell of convention, it there slowly creates a fester which may ultimately break through, in violence, to the surface.

It has been said by an American with a keen eye for the

externals that "Americans look upon the international yachting and other contests almost as though they were serious battles, and are elated or depressed accordingly; while the English take these matters much more calmly." This is undoubtedly true as regards the outward show. But of the two the Americans are the better losers, inasmuch as they so soon dissipate outwardly the emotions of defeat. They may not be, conventionally, as good winners as the English, for the positives of victory affect them strongly and perhaps somewhat too obviously; but a straight defeat leaves them ultimately only healthily revengeful. And a healthy feeling of revenge is a wholesome stimulant. The English, on the contrary—the better class of English, that is to say: the representative class by which, in past times, we were wont to judge the country—the English, because they have in comparatively recent years been bred in the unctuous hypocrisy of sportsmanship, are easy and natural in their courteous acceptance of either defeat or victory.

But hypocrisy is not a virtue. It is only the disguise of vice. And a pose is only a pose—an attitude, if you will, representing not a moral attribute, but a conception of the social utility of the moral attribute it pretends to represent. It evidences no real change of heart. The English of today are those of one hundred years ago, so far as their essential selves are concerned; and no one who knows his England well needs to be told that the English of those days took their defeats with a very human ill-grace. They had not then learned to say, as Stevenson has said since, "Our business in this world is not to succeed, but to continue to fight in good spirits;" and until Anglo-Saxon characteristics become impotent, as a world force, in the emasculating refinements on the one hand and the devitalizing coarsenesses on the other of a too self-indulgent-civilization, the present-day English are not likely to embarrass a still flourishing business of succeeding, handed down to them by their forefathers as a main inheritance, by any ideals, the effect of which would be in the direction of equalizing the chances of their rivals.

The business of the English, past, present and future, always has been, is, and always will be, to succeed. That, in a nutshell, is the secret of their marvellous success. To show good spirits in defeat is a policy in furtherance of their chief concern—i. e.—the business of succeeding,—not a sen-

timement in modification of it. Nor could the fact well be otherwise. A country whose people truly accepted defeat as a sort of second-hand pleasure in victory—the reflected enjoyment of seeing someone else (and a rival) pleased—or whose outward show of “sportsmanship” correctly expressed the quality of their real feelings—a country of a character so amorphous would be on the high road to ruin. It is only those who are too spineless even to aspire to personal success who take defeat with the same inward good grace that the English have trained themselves to show outwardly as a matter of good form. The normal human being—the natural man—rebels in spirit, if not in overt act, against defeat in whatever guise it comes, not only because defeat is an offence to his vanity (a consideration of sufficient potency), but because of a remnant of instinct surviving in him from those far-off days when to suffer defeat was likely to be distinctly unhealthy.

Defeat and death were terms which the early Briton (had he known the words, as well as the conditions which the words represented) would have been likely to connect in his mind. The two concomitants, as they then were—defeat and death,—had an unpleasant habit of coming together with a suddenness which eliminated the element of personal humiliation from the loser-side of the situation in exactly the same proportion that it heightened the effect of the example. Hence the English, who are the most conservative of the highly civilized peoples of the world, and therefore the most retentive of those primitive instincts which originated in painful experience and grew strong in the perilous acquirements of it—the English, we may logically assume, would be the race which more than any other would be most likely to conserve the vital objection of the stone-age man to defeat in any form; the assumption having, as a qualifying or dissembling correlative, the no less logical presumption that they would be led by their civilization to camouflage the crudeness of their primal impulse with some of the artificial conventions of their ancient society. Defeat having ceased to have, for them, a fatal significance as its normal characteristic, and the original instinctive objection to it being of a somewhat rude expression, they gradually built up around the offending natural instinct, whose unrefinement shocked their cultivated taste, a sort of wall or pretence of well-bred

ignorance of its existence, which had the double effect of screening an unsightly feature while protecting and perpetuating its existence.

That the instinct survives—that it retains practically all of its inherent primal force and vitality as a racial factor, albeit the want of perfect freedom of action may have made it a little flabby—is, I believe, easy to prove. But the proof must be sought not in direct examples, which are not often forthcoming, but in indirect and, apparently, uncorrelated incidents, which, like the widely separated vents of some gigantic subterranean cauldron, serve to relieve the central source of heat and pressure. These incidents, though numerous, do not, as the French say, spring to the eye, their real significance and application being generally so obscured or overshadowed by the popular appeal of the larger interest or issue with which they are associated, that, except to the discerning few, they appear to be emotional safety-valves of whatever source of public feeling they seem to be relieving, rather than outlets for the evacuation of bad humours from many a festering sore of wounded vanity.

It would, however, be invidious to specify these incidents here. To *think* that ill-will arises directly from the nature of the occasion is always a pleasanter and more beneficial personal and social moral influence than to *know* that it had its origin in some indirect and possibly remote defeat, the circumstances and character of which may or may not have been worthy of the maturing crop of consequences. It is, for instance, more flattering to the corporate—the national—vanity of the English for them to imagine that their resentment of an obnoxious or irritating situation (momentous or trivial, as the case may be) occurring between themselves and another people, arises, as a pure and simple product of direct injury or offence, primarily and solely out of the inherent defects and injustices of the situation itself, rather than in part and inceptively from some hidden festering sore, which marks the spot where a searching defeat, or series of defeats, long past, perhaps, and by the world forgot, still rankles in their inner consciousness. Yet it would not be difficult for anyone familiar with the mentality and psychology of the English to trace much of the animus of the national popular ego in many an affair of grave international importance to some essentially inconse-

quential defeat, not in the *game*, but in the *games* of life.

And it is well for the English that this is so—that they are *not* good losers. No friend of the race would have it otherwise. The simple and logical fact that to lose is still a greater shock to their pride than it is to a people more accustomed to losing, is one of the most hopeful signs among the various portents of Anglo-Saxon decadence. So long as a people resent defeat with a wholesome and natural heartiness, so long is the primal force in them the basis and support of the national character. Veneer it as you will, the rough, tough, sturdy grain is there to strengthen and sustain the softer qualities. It is when defeat is accepted with inward grace, as beautiful as it is waxen, that a once virile people begin to fall to pieces. The only thing that has saved and will continue to save the English from a fifth-rate place in the world is the fact that they are *not* good losers. May they never be that!

LINCOLN WILBAR.